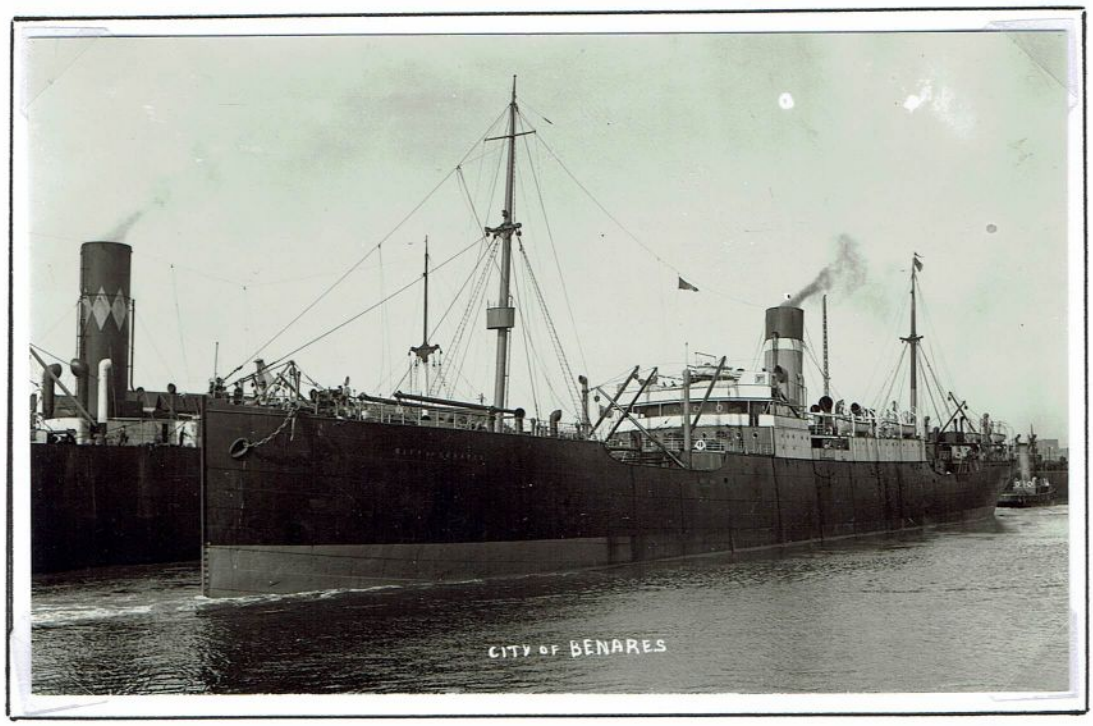
The Portuguese Army on the Western Front

(Corpo Expedicionário Português: CEP)

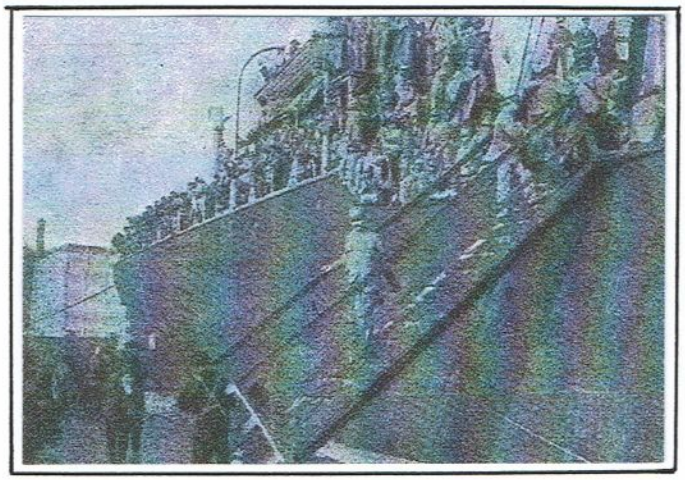
Although Portuguese troops had been involved for some time in the conflict with German forces in East Africa, the two countries were not officially at war. However, in 1916, at the request of her old ally Great Britain, Portugal commandeered over seventy German merchant vessels which had been sheltering in Portuguese ports, some since the beginning of the war.

As a result of this action, Germany declared war on Portugal on 9th March 1916.

French and British officials agreed that a Portuguese force should be sent to France and, after a period of intensive training, the 1st Brigade was transported to France on 30th January 1917, arriving at Brest three days later, followed by other brigades in the following months. By June 1917, 37,000 men had been shipped to France.



SS City of Benares
This ship, belonging to Ellerman Lines, was used as a troopship during the War. It was one of the fleet used to transport the first Portuguese Army units to France.



Contemporary newspaper photograph of Portuguese troops disembarking (1)

The Portuguese troops were attached to the British army and, after training in trench warfare, assumed responsibility for a stretch of the front line along the River Lys. In time, the Portuguese force consisted of two Divisions, each with three Brigades and supporting machine gun and artillery units. Separate heavy artillery units were also established (Corpo de Artilharia Pesada: CAP).

Campaign Postal Service

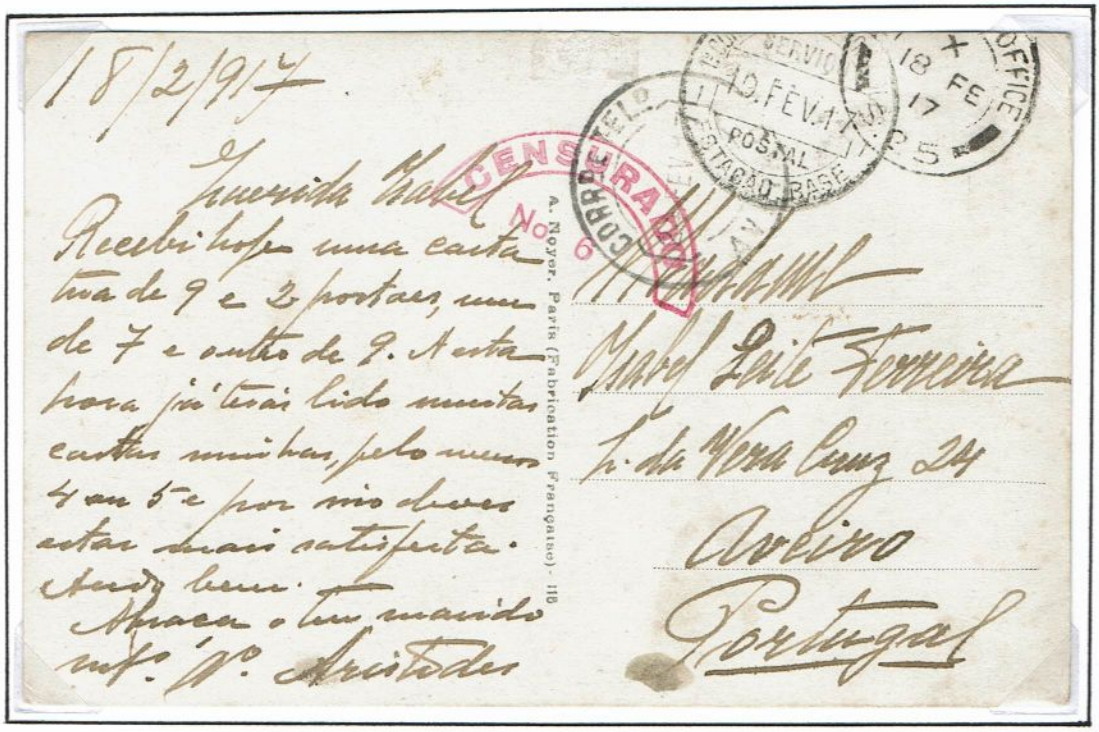
(Serviço Postal de Campanha: SPC)

The postal service for the Portuguese force was established in February 1917, under the command of Captain Humberto Serrao, an officer in the General Administration of Posts and Telegraphs. The first postal station at the Central Postal Base Station (Estação Central da Base Postal: ECBP) was set up at Boulogne-sur-Mer, using equipment brought from Portugal or supplied by the British Postal Service.

The first mail received a circular datestamp supplied from Lisbon.

Captain Humberto Serrao (2)

CEP first military free-franking cachet (3)



Postcard to Portugal dated 18th February 1917, bearing first cachet, Censurado 6 and British APO Postmark (S.25)

From March 1917, circular date stamps were used similar to those used by the British army. They were supplied by Charles Wright & Son, London. They were marked CEP -SPC and were numbered from 1 – 27, although only Nos 1- 22 are known.

Circular date stamp (4)

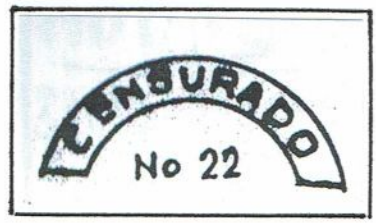
no. do SPC	Adquiridas	Existentes	Desaparecidas		Inutilizadas	Cedidas	Distribuição
			Causa furtuita	9 de Abril			
1	2	2					Estação Testa de Etapes 1
2	2	1		1			Estação Testa de Etapes 2
3	2	-		2			3a. Brigada
4	2	2					1a. Brigada
5	2	2					1a. Divisão
6	2	1				1	QG do CEP
7	2	2					Base
8	8	6			2		Estação Central da Base Postal
9	2	-	2				Porto de Desembarque
10	2	-		2			2a. Divisão
11	2	-		2			4a. Brigada
12	2	-		2			6a. Brigada
13	2	1				1	2a. Brigada
14	2	2					Zona de Instrução
15	2	-		2			5a. Brigada
16	2	2					Dep. de Material da Base
17	2	2					—
18	2	2					—
19	2	1	1				—
20	2	-	2				QC - 1o. Escalão
21	2	2					Depósito de Bagagens
22	2	2					Porto de Embarque
23	2	2					Não distribuidas
24	2	-	2				
25	2	1	1				
26	2	1	1				
27	2	2					
Total	60	36	9	11	2	2	

Record of SPC stamps issued (5)

YMCA Envelope to Porto bearing CEP – SPC7 stamp dated 6th November 1917 and Censurado 34

In use at Base HQ, Ambleteuse

On arrival in France, the postal unit had 7 censorship stamps (Censurado) but this was expanded as the number of troops increased and censorship was undertaken by unit commanders. It appears 120 in all were issued, but not all are known.



Censurado stamp (4)

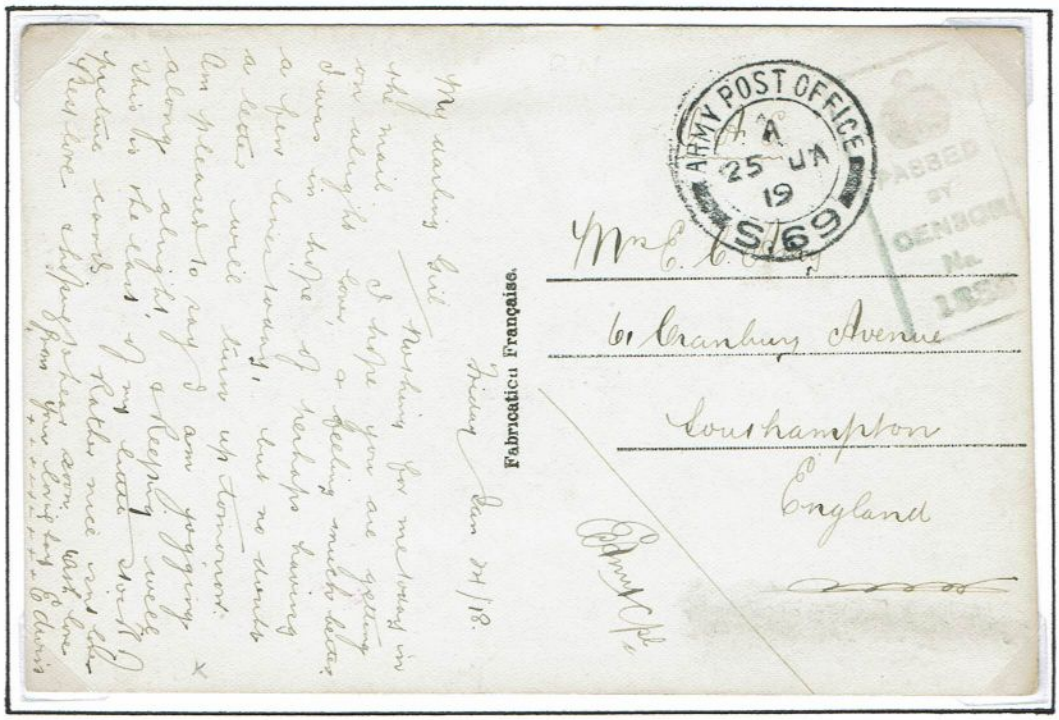
Cover dated 6th May 1918 bearing CEP – SPC7 and Censurado 45 stamps

Addressed to the Consul for Portugal, Swansea, Inglaterra.

The British Mission to the Portuguese Army

Many senior British officers were reluctant to accept Portuguese troops into the front line, regarding them as inferior soldiers. This is borne out by denigrating comments in reports and later memoires. However, this view was largely unfounded and often expressed to conceal failings of some British units.

As part of the negotiations for the entry of Portugal into the war, it was agreed that a British Mission to the CEP be established, consisting of liaison officers, some Portuguese speaking, and support staff. Mail from these bear the British circular date stamp S.69



Postcard from Cpl Edwin Amy, ASC, 25th January 1919

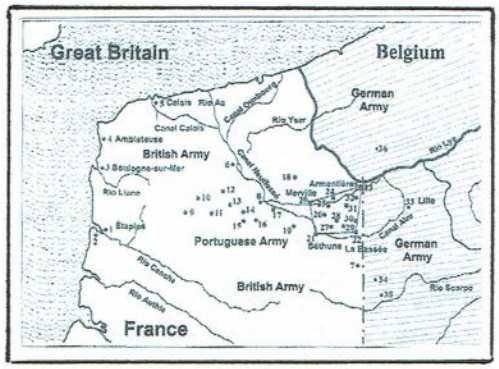
Postcard from Driver Fred Timmins, Royal Engineers, 21st January 1919

Composition and Deployment of Portuguese Divisions

Two Divisions were eventually established in France.

- <u>1st Division</u>
  - 1st Brigade (21st, 22nd, 28th and 34th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - 2nd Brigade (7th, 23rd, 24th and 25th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - 3rd Brigade (9th, 12th, 14th and 15th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - Division troops
- <u>2nd Division</u>
  - 4th (Minho) Brigade (3rd, 8th, 20th and 29th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - 5th Brigade (4th, 10th, 13th and 17th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - 6th Brigade (1st, 2nd, 5th and 11th infantry battalions and a 75 mm light mortar battery)
  - Division troops

The force took over a section of the front line along the River Lys, under the British XI Corps, with a total 18km frontage.



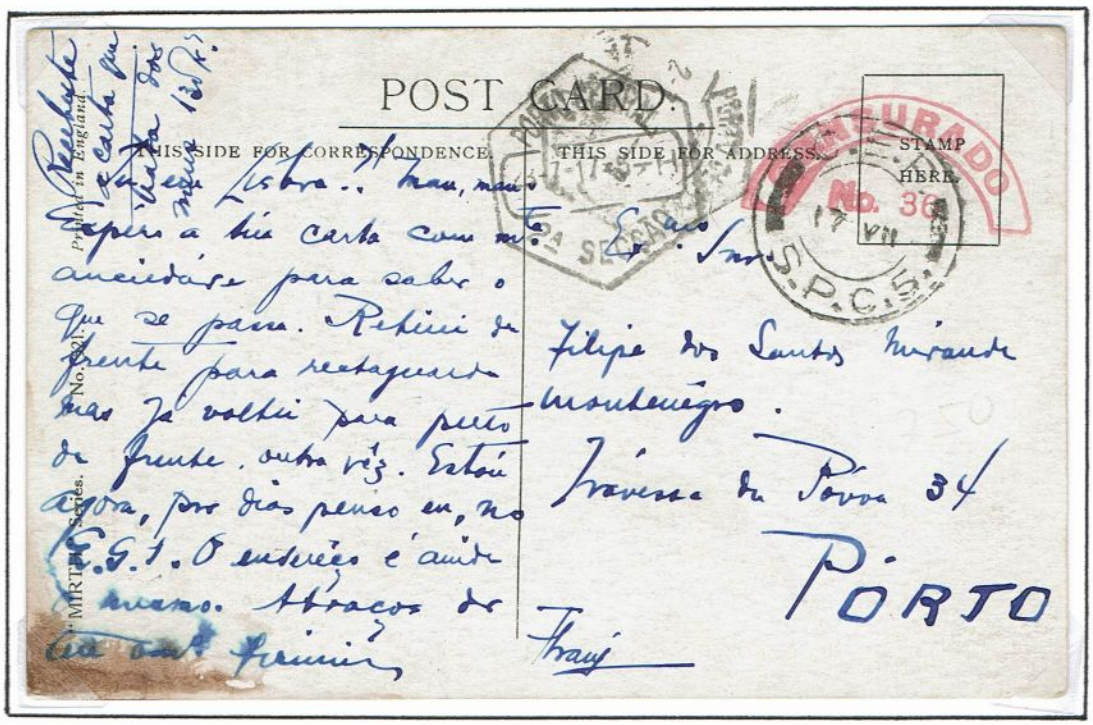
Location of Portuguese troops (3)

Postcard to Tavira dated 11th March 1918 bearing CEP – SPC4 and Censurado 104 stamps. In use at HQ of 1st Brigade at Le Touret

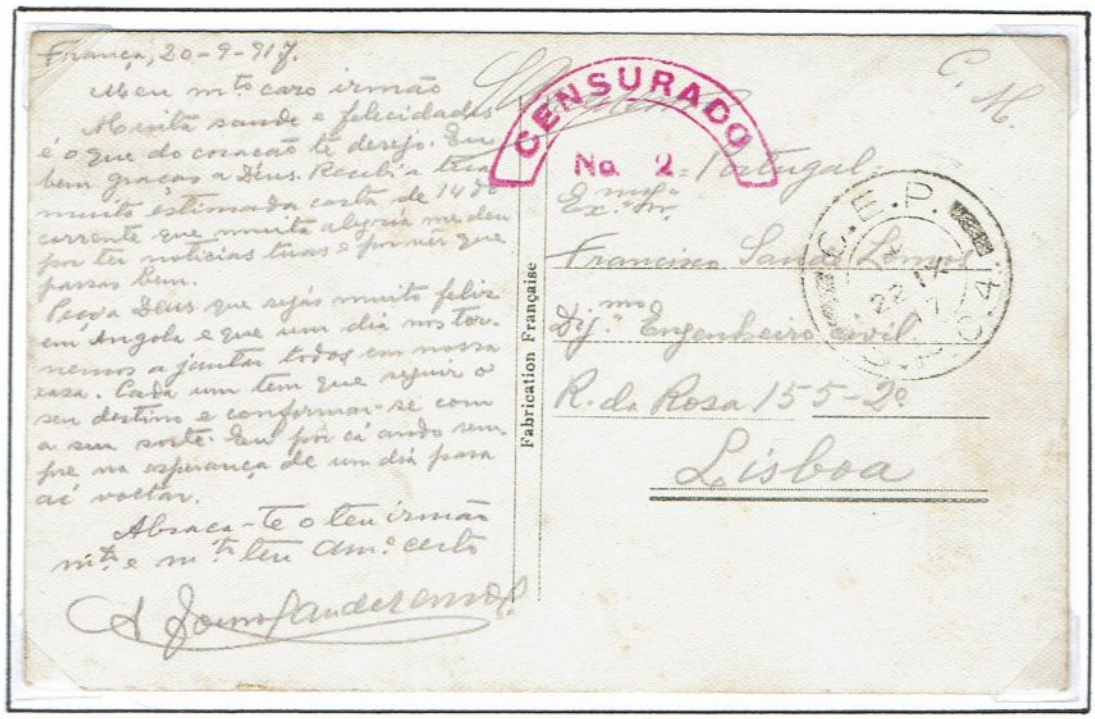
1ST Division

The following CEP – SPC stamps were used by the HQ of the 1st Division and of the constituent Brigades:

Divn HQ: SPC5, 1St Brigade HQ: SPC4, 2nd Brigade HQ: SPC13, 3rd Brigade HQ: SPC3



Postcard bearing CEP – SPC5, in use at 1st Division HQ, based at Lestrem from May 1917 – March 1918. Censurado 36



Postcard bearing CEP – SPC4, in use at 1st Brigade HQ, based at Le Touret in March 1918. Censurado 2

1ST Division

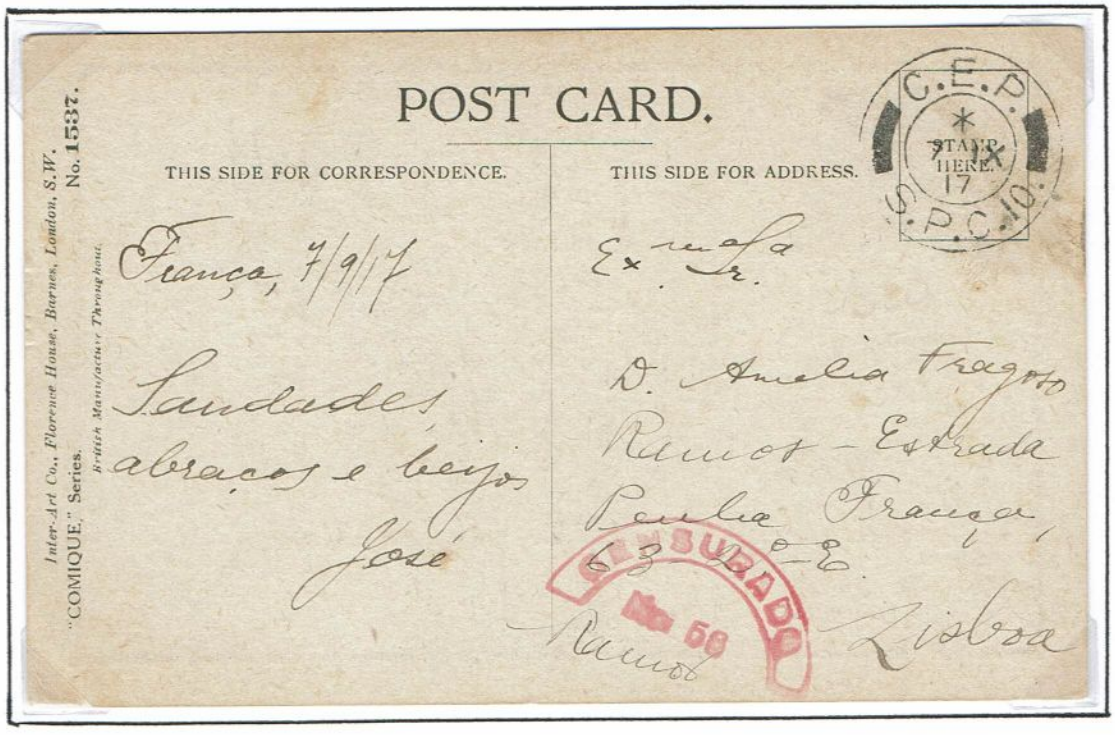
Postcard bearing CEP – SPC13, in use at 2nd Brigade HQ, based at Vielle Chapelle in March 1918. Censurado 104

Military Postcard bearing CEP – SPC3, in use at 3rd Brigade HQ, based at Huit Maisons from May – October 1917. Censurado 79

2nd Division

The following CEP – SPC stamps were used by the HQ of the 2nd Division and of the constituent Brigades:

Divn HQ: SPC10, 4th Brigade HQ: SPC11, 5th Brigade HQ: SPC15, 6th Brigade HQ: SPC12

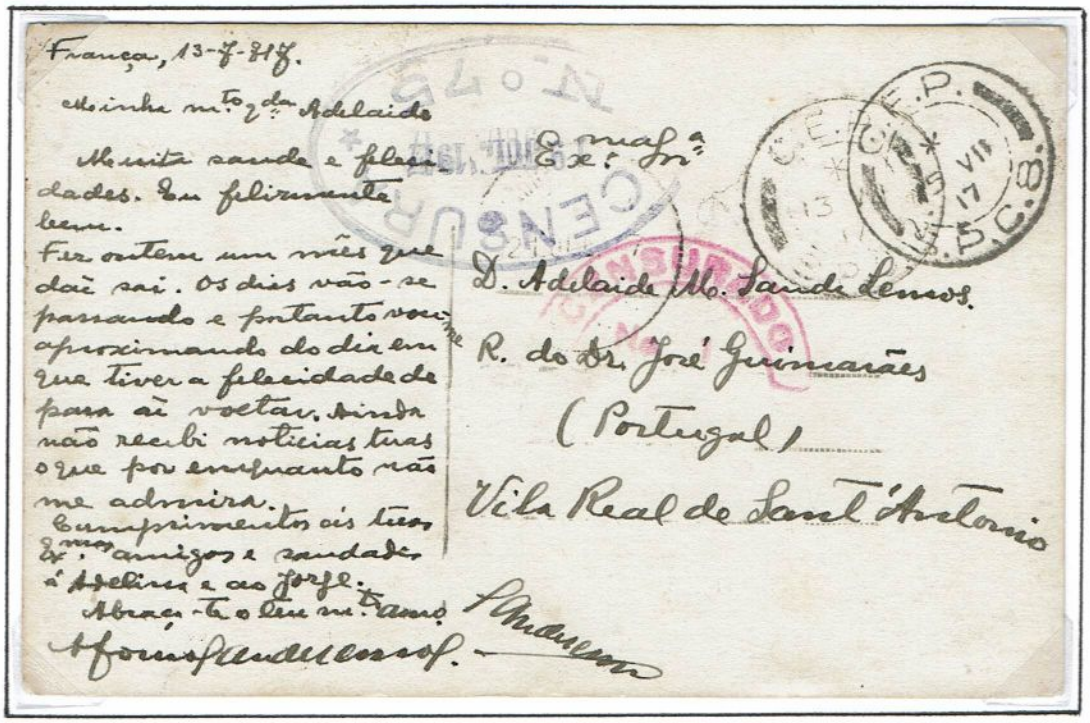


Postcard bearing CEP – SPC10, in use at 2nd Division HQ, based at Roquetoire from May – September 1917. Censurado 56.

Campaign Service postcard bearing CEP – SPC11, in use at 4th Brigade HQ, based at Le Touret from September – December 1917. Censurado 50.

2nd Division

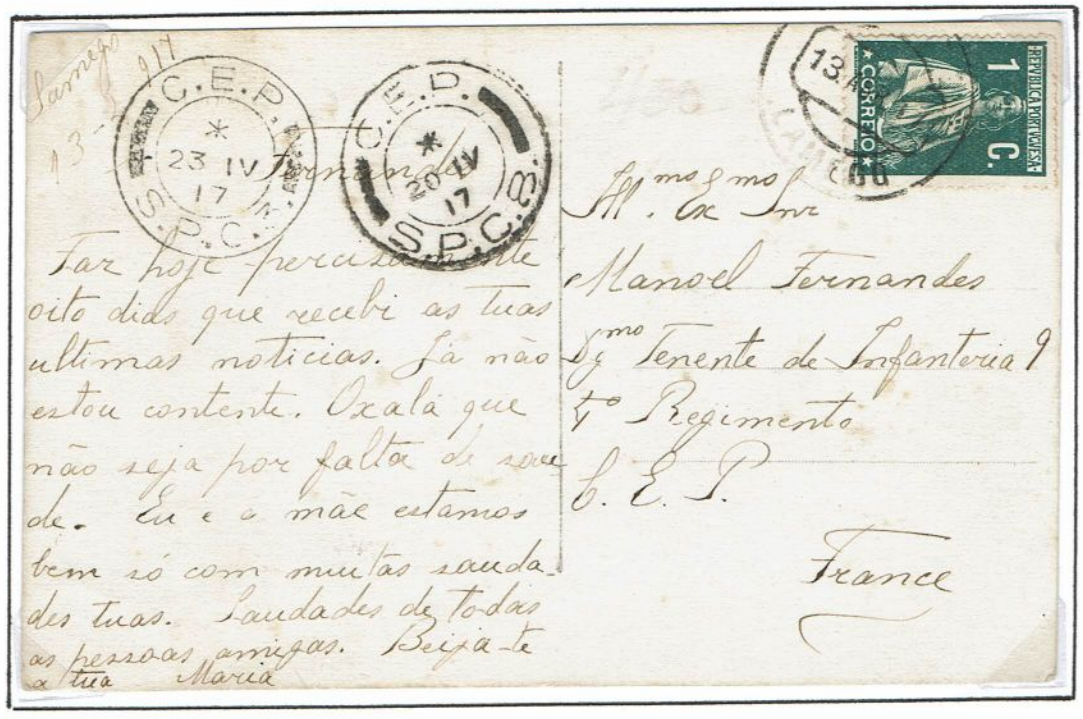
Postcard bearing CEP – SPC15, in use at 5th Brigade HQ, based at La Gorgue from March – April 1918. Censurado 104



Postcard bearing CEP – SPC12, in use at 6th Brigade HQ, based at Ouve-Virquin from May – July 1917. Censurado 1. Also CEP – SPC8, ECBP, Boulogne-sur-mer

Mail to the Troops

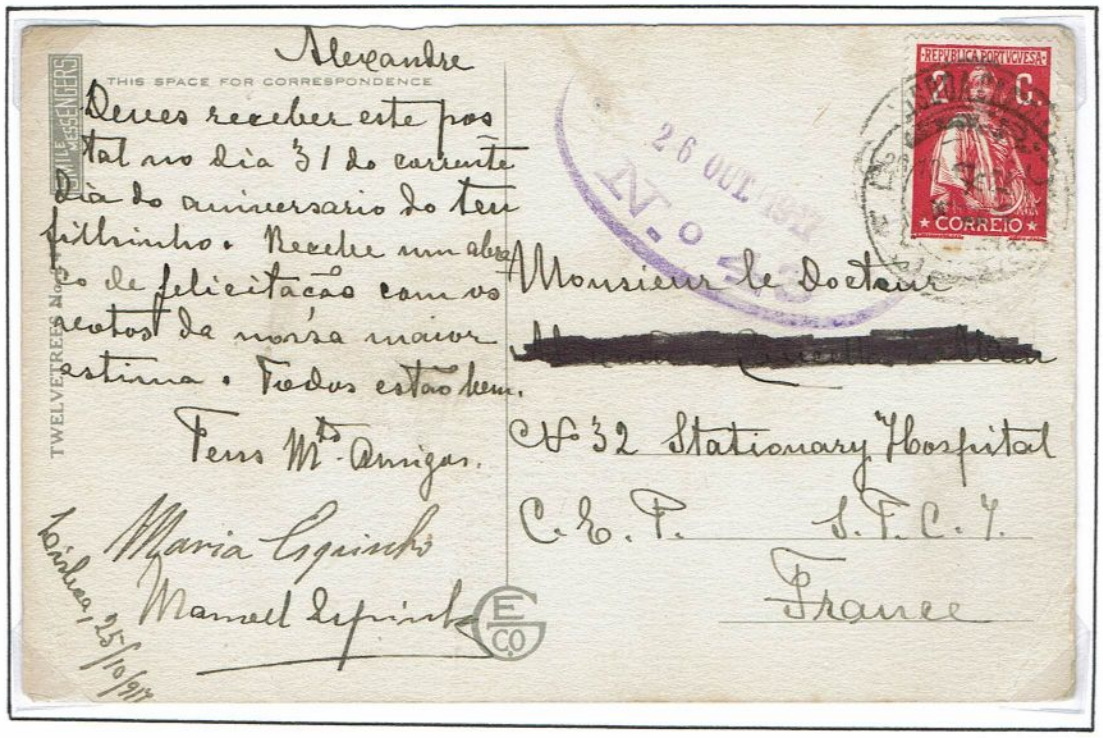
Although mail from the troops is not uncommon, mail addressed to members of the CEP is comparatively rare and is often in poor condition. This perhaps reflects the conditions in which they served.



Postcard to 2nd Lieutenant, Portuguese Infantry, bearing CEP – SPC8, ECBP, Boulogne-sur-mer and CEP – SPC3, in use at 3rd Brigade HQ, based at Ouve-Virquin

Postcard to Sergeant, Portuguese Infantry, bearing CEP – SPC8, ECBP, Boulogne-sur-mer and CEP – SPC11, in use at 4th Brigade HQ, based at Enquin-les-Mines.

Mail to the Troops



Postcard to Doctor, No 32 Stationary Hospital, (SPC7), Ambleteuse, bearing CEP – SPC8, ECBP, Boulogne-sur-mer.

Cover to 2nd Lieutenant, Portuguese Infantry, backstamped CEP – SPC11, in use at 4th Brigade HQ, based at Enquin-les-Mines

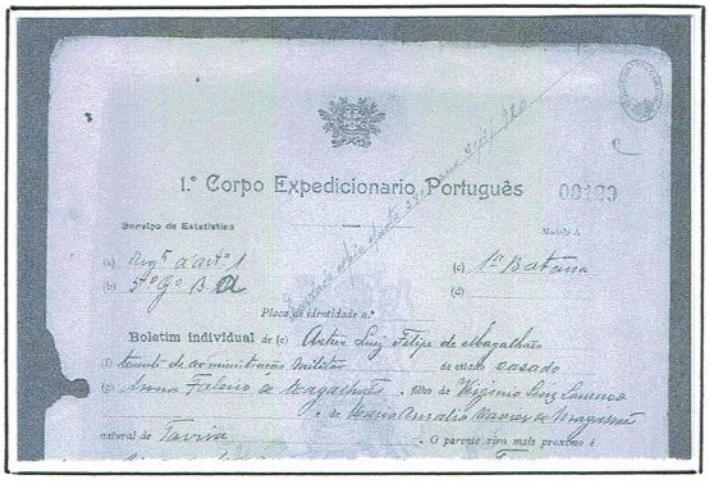
Deteriorating Conditions and Declining Morale

Originally, it was intended to send a third Portuguese Division to France, but, partly because of the need to use all available troop transport to ship the American Army to France, this did not happen. Thus, the Portuguese in the front line spent many months without the prospect of relief.

In addition, while many officers were able to take leave, either in Paris or at home, no leave was allowed for the soldiers under their command.

Postcard from an officer returning from leave. Artur Luiz Felipe de Magalhaes was a lieutenant in the military administration and was a prolific writer to his wife. This postcard bears a Spanish stamp and his service record (6) shows that he was on leave at this time. As no sea transport was available, officers going to or from Portugal on leave were obliged to travel by train through Spain, a neutral country. To avoid any incident with the Spanish authorities, they travelled in civilian clothes.

This officer returned from leave – many did not, leaving the Portuguese troops short of leadership.



Extract from service record (6)

Battle of La Lys

In April 1918, in recognition of the condition of the Portuguese troops, it was decided to withdraw the two divisions from the front line. The withdrawal of the 1st Division into reserve began on 6th April, with the 2nd Division due to start its withdrawal on the 9th.

On 9th April, the German army launched Operation Georgette against the Allied front line on the River Lys. Eight German divisions attacked, with the Portuguese 2nd Division bearing the brunt of the assault. Despite some strong resistance, the line was broken and the surviving Portuguese troops were forced to withdraw, alongside neighbouring British units. Almost 8,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or missing and another 7,000 taken prisoner. The 2nd Division virtually ceased to exist.

Another postcard from Artur de Magalhaes, who was attached to the 5th Brigade during April 1918. This was written on 8th April, the day before the German assault. It took almost a month to reach his wife in Tavira, at least twice as long as earlier cards. Bears CEP – SPC 15, Censurado 104.

Data	SPC 2 ETE2	SPC10 QG 2D	SPC11 QG 4BI	SPC15 QG 5BI	SPC12 QG 6BI
06/04/1918	La Gorgue	Lestrem	Levantie	La Touret	Hult Maisons
07/04/1918	La Gorgue	Lestrem	Levantie	La Touret	Hult Maisons
08/04/1918	Lestrem	Lestrem	Levantie	La Touret	Hult Maisons
09/04/1918	Lestrem	Lestrem	Levantie	La Touret	Hult Maisons
10/04/1918	Dispersa em combate	Dispersa em combate	Dispersa em combate	Dispersa em combate	Dispersa em combate
11/04/1918	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada
12/04/1918	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada	Encerrada

Record of location of SPC stamps, showing those held by the 2nd Division as "Dispersa em combate" – "Encerrada" (Closed) (2)

After the Battle

Following the destruction of the 2nd Division at La Lys, the remaining troops were placed under British command. In June 1918, the 1st Division returned to the front line in the defence of the Lilliers-Steenbekque Line.

Postcard dated 19th September 1918 bearing CEP – SPC4, HQ of 1st Division, located at Guarbecque, nr Lilliers. Censurado 20

Le détachement portugais.

Contemporary newspaper photograph of Portuguese troops marching in victory parade in Paris, 14th July 1919

Notes

(1) Le Pays de France, 1917

(2) A Formacao dos Servicos Postais de Campanha, Momentos de Historia

(3) Eduardo & Luis Barreiros: The Portuguese Expeditionary Corps in WWI France, London Philatelist, Nov 2016

(4) Kennedy & Crabb: The Postal History of the British Army in World War I

(5) CT Poynton collection

(6) Arquivo Historico Militar